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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2110
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0578
RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT 0223
RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ALMATY 0143
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT 0222
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 0113
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 1230
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000374

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL PINR BG

SUBJECT: CONTINUED TWISTS AND TURNS IN SEDITION CASE
AGAINST JOURNALIST

REF: 07 DHAKA 1785

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Geeta Pasi, reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Following another postponement of his trial on sedition charges, Bangladeshi journalist Salahuddin Shoaib Choudhury was briefly detained by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) on March 18, allegedly on suspicion of drug possession. He was released without charge later that night. Choudhury earlier informed POLOFF he has been in discussion with the Directorate General-Forces Intelligence (DGFI) about how to get his case dismissed once and for all. END SUMMARY.

DGFI GETTING INVOLVED?

¶2. (C) Salahuddin Shoaib Choudhury, the Bangladeshi journalist charged with sedition for attempting to attend a conference in Israel in 2003, met with POLOFF recently to discuss the status of his trial. Choudhury informed POLOFF that his lawyer, Barrister Samarendra Goswami, was approached in late January by a representative of the Bangladesh military's Directorate General-Forces Intelligence (DGFI). The DGFI officer discussed with Goswami on what grounds the government could dismiss the case. DGFI later told Choudhury they had recommended to the Chief Adviser the case against him be dropped. DGFI's preferred method of dismissing the case would be for the Public Prosecutor to tell the court the government is no longer willing to prosecute the case. (NOTE: The Embassy has discussed Choudhury's case at length with senior Bangladesh government officials, including DGFI officers. END NOTE.)

ANOTHER POSTPONEMENT

¶3. (C) Choudhury also said the Public Prosecutor had gotten in touch with Choudhury's lower court lawyer, Advocate Govinda Pramanik, and suggested the government would not move the trial forward. On March 16, the trial court judge granted another postponement, this time until mid-April.

A LATE-NIGHT RAID

¶4. (C) On the evening of March 18, POLOFF received a call from Choudhury's brother Sohail, who said his brother's offices were being raided by the RAB, and the RAB officers were claiming they had found illegal drugs in his desk drawer. Sohail said his brother was being taken to RAB-3 headquarters for interrogation. Embassy officers contacted the authorities to determine the nature of the accusation against Choudhury.

¶5. (C) A little after midnight, Choudhury was released from RAB-3 custody and returned home. Choudhury told POLOFF RAB officers burst into the offices of his newspaper, the Weekly Blitz, at about 1930hrs on March 18. They held Choudhury and ten or so other staff present in a back room while the officers searched the premises. A little over an hour later, they showed Choudhury some pills they said they found in his drawer and told him they were taking him in for questioning. The RAB officers claimed the pills were "yaba," an illegal methamphetamine. Choudhury reported that he was blindfolded and brought to RAB-3 headquarters in Dhaka, where he claims officers questioned him and forced him to sign a document he did not have a chance to read. Choudhury said the officers did not physically harm him at any point during the questioning.

¶6. (C) Choudhury said that after about two hours, the tone of the RAB officers changed. They claimed there had been a "misunderstanding," and he would be free to go. He asked how, if they suspected him of drug possession, they could just release him, and why did they go through the whole exercise in the first place. The officers repeated that it had been a mistake. They asked him if he would become an informer for them, which he declined. Choudhury's brother picked him up at 0045hrs on March 19 and took him home.

¶7. (C) The next morning, Choudhury called to thank the

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Embassy for our assistance. He said he believed that only speedy action by the Embassy prevented him from prolonged detention. He added he had no idea why the government had done this, given earlier indications by DGFI it wanted to see his case dismissed. Choudhury said the RAB did not file any charges against him or place conditions upon his release.

AN OPAQUE GOVERNMENT EXPLANATION

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¶8. (C) In conversations with senior Bangladesh government officials, CDA a.i. asked about the March 18 incident. Home Secretary Abdul Karim, said RAB, acting on information from

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undercover police work, raided Choudhury's office and discovered a significant quantity of "yaba" as well as "blue" (pornographic) films. Nevertheless, Karim said the RAB released Choudhury on the condition this not happen again. CDA a.i. asked why, given the apparently serious nature of the drug possession charge, the RAB had released Choudhury. Karim did not answer directly, though he admitted that only a few people had ever been prosecuted for possession of pornographic material. Foreign Adviser Iftekhar Chowdhury provided a similar account of the charges to CDA a.i. in a subsequent conversation.

COMMENT: CONTINUED TWISTS AND TURNS

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¶9. (C) It is unclear why the RAB decided to go after Choudhury at this moment, right as DGFI was showing some indications that the case against him would might be dismissed. RAB has been actively pursuing cases of drug possession among Dhaka's elite. (Reftel) Choudhury has been involved in questionable business deals in the past, but has never been implicated in crimes like drug possession. If this was an attempt somehow to damage his credibility, it

seems to have fallen flat; if it was a legitimate bust, the readiness to let him off with just a warning is likely the result of senior officials understanding that the arrest would become a public relations nightmare for the government.

¶10. (SBU) Post continues to monitor this case closely.
Pasi